

It wasn't a Harley-Davidson, but National Park Service Ranger Wayne Phillips and his colleagues managed to put together a motorcycle.

Well, sort of.

A few years back, the 30-year park service veteran helped out during the annual Potomac Watershed Cleanup, which brings together thousands of volunteers to clean the shores of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers.

Along with cans, cups and plastic bags, Phillips and his fellow volunteers pulled out an entire motorcycle frame from the Anacostia's waterways.

"We were jokingly piecing together a complete bike," Phillips said. "We found wheels, tires in there."

Phillips' river discovery wasn't really much of a stretch. Organizers of the annual cleanup — which marks its 18th anniversary on Saturday — say the region's rivers are loaded with all sorts of odd junk that doesn't belong there, along with heaps of trash that pollute the waterways.

Last year's event, for example, yielded a string of unique finds, from a full keg of beer to nearly 900 tires and 62 single shoes, said Wende Pearson, who works as a cleanup manager for the Alice Ferguson Foundation, the group sponsoring the event.

And that, organizers say, is not acceptable.

"It's sort of been a catalyst," Pearson said of the cleanup. "We have been doing this for a long time, and we aren't seeing a significant change."

But foundation officials are optimistic that change is on the way. Saturday's event is part of an overall effort being led by the foundation to get the trash out of the Potomac watershed for

good.

A slew of local and regional government officials, including Reps. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) and Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), have signed the Potomac Watershed Trash Treaty, which pledges to clean the watershed by 2013. (Both Members also plan to pitch-in during Saturday's cleanup as well.)

"I think you've got to have an ambitious goal in order to challenge people to take on this kind of responsibility," Van Hollen said in an interview Wednesday. "You've got to inspire people."

Additional government pledges for help came on March 16, when more than 265 government leaders gathered for the first-ever Potomac Watershed Trash Summit.

"The summit was really, really good," said Tracy Bowen, executive director of the foundation. "We had great attendance. We had a lot of elected officials making a commitment. I think we are seeing a shift in the region in how we are looking at trash."

Both the trash treaty and summit will make a big difference in the health of the Potomac River, Hoyer said.

"Both efforts help raise awareness in our region about the importance of taking responsibility for our communities and the ways we can preserve and protect this river, its tributaries and our environment," Hoyer said.

Over the next few months, officials will need to get the basics about the region's trash, Bowen said, from where the region's "trash hot-spots" are located to figuring out exactly how much is being spent on the issue (and where that money is going).

Van Hollen, who chairs the Trash-Free Potomac Advisory Council, is also working with officials from the EPA and NOAA to find solutions, he said.

Getting residents involved is also vital. The foundation and its numerous partner organizations plan to undertake extensive education efforts to deter residents from dumping their trash in inappropriate places.

Bowen said a 1-800 number will likely be launched within the next month to allow residents to report illegal dumping when they spot it. Increasing recycling is also vital: Foundation officials estimate that 24 percent of all trash they collect from the rivers is recyclable.

“We no longer want to have to send out thousands of volunteers,” Pearson said.

Still, it’s crucial to build that grass-roots base of people who know trash in the rivers remains a problem, Bowen said, because it builds momentum for the effort.

“This is something that I think the community is going to rally behind,” Van Hollen said. “We’ve got to get the word out.”

There will be more than 300 cleanup sites in Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia and Washington, D.C., on Saturday. Locations include fields, forests, parking lots and other inland sites where trash can be removed before it enters nearby waterways, according to the foundation.

“It’s a substantial perspective on the region, looking at what the trash problem is really like, because we have cleanup sites in all parts of the watershed,” Bowen said. “I’m excited that it’s not the only thing that’s happening. We are trying to look beyond that point, and that’s what’s really exciting.”

Hoyer also added: “The volunteers who come out to the annual Potomac Watershed Clean Up truly make a positive contribution to the overall quality of life in their own communities as well as those throughout the watershed.”

Phillips, the park ranger, is an organizer of a cleanup site in Anacostia Park. There, volunteers will clean the Anacostia River's shoreline of the east side of the park, he said.

The trash that is removed might be replaced by new junk in a few weeks time, but Phillips said the cleanup is important because it connects nearby residents to the river.

"Having that ownership of the park is really important," Phillips said. "People realize what they are doing in the neighborhoods to the Anacostia. ... A lot of times, people say, 'The water's dirty. There's a lot of trash.' People have to realize where the water is coming from."

The nearly two decades worth of cleanup efforts — coupled with increasing media coverage — has helped the region's two rivers, Phillips said.

Park rangers who study the Anacostia

River's fish are noticing the animals are increasingly healthy, Phillips said.

"You're not going to see a clear-up in a sense in seeing blue water out there ... it's only the color that it is, because of the moving soil," Phillips said. "It's a lot cleaner than it has been in the years past."

Pearson said she is optimistic that the Potomac River will be trash-free within seven years.

A partnership between the group's thousands of grass-roots volunteers, coupled with support from government officials and private corporations, can only bring about good things, she added.

“We are getting a lot of folks who are putting their foot down,” she said. “They just really want something to happen.”

The 18th Annual Potomac Watershed Cleanup will take place from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturday. To volunteer for a cleanup site, contact the Alice Ferguson Foundation at (301) 292-5665 or visit their Web site, www.fergusonfoundation.org.